Aden

than the majority of the inhabitants, although I have a high regard for the Ruler himself.

As we sat and waited for lunch to appear there was a general hum of conversation, but it was with some relief that eventually we saw more active preparations for the coming meal, as the servants came in and laid strips of cotton cloth on the floor down the centre of the room to do duty for a table. Then a living chain was formed between the dining-room and the kitchen, and with incredible speed dishes of rice and of curry and of fruit, and piles of flat round cakes of bread, came up the chain and down on to the table, until the cloth itself was almost invisible and there was a hot heavy smell of spices and meat, which in that densely-crowded room was rather overpowering. The dishes came to an end and there was one of those irritating and unnecessary pauses, common to the East on these occasions, while we sat waiting for the signal to begin with well-bred concealment of our impatience. We were hungry, but it would have been the worst of bad manners to show that we were in any way interested in what had been set before us until our host had invited us to begin.

Everybody had ceased to speak and most people were assessing the possibilities of the meal in a silence of expectancy. The Naib looked towards the door through which the food had been brought, waiting for an indication from his head servant that the last dish had been set in place. The servant appeared and nodded his head and the Naib glanced at me and said "Bismillah", which means "In the name of God", the polite invitation to begin. We all shuffled forward the few inches which separated us from the food and with many muttered "Bismillahs" started to pick delicately at what was nearest to us, thus showing our good manners.

It was at this moment, while the silence was profound and everybody's attention was occupied with the food, that it happened. There was a shattering explosion, and the pungent smell of gunpowder filled the room. The whole building shook as the ground trembled and plaster fell from the ceiling on to the food. The whole assembly, with the exception of three, came rapidly to their feet and looked wildly round while